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**‘Favourite places in school’ for lower-set ‘ability’ pupils:
School groupings practices and children’s spatial orientations**

Author information

Dr Ceri Brown

Lecturer in Education

Education Department

University of Bath

Bath, BA2 7AY

Tel: 01225 386294

Email: C.L.Brown@bath.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper contributes to the recent turn within *Children’s Geographies* concerned with understanding and illuminating educational inequalities. The focus is upon pupils assigned to lower ‘ability’ groupings, in a school under pressure to raise attainment. The objective of the paper is twofold, firstly to consider how school grouping practices affect children’s sense of belonging in lessons, and secondly, to contextualise these findings against children’s spatial orientations within the broader school environment. It is argued that a spatial focus may shed light upon the educational policy drivers that contribute to the exclusion of disadvantaged children. Neo-liberal imperatives of accountability and performance can be seen to shape hierarchies of belonging, where pupils’ positioning in ‘ability’ groupings enables/limits the spatial agency that they can exert. Macro policy concerns are mapped onto micro school processes concerning the construction and governance of school spaces, using theoretical insights from Michel Foucault and R.D Sack.

Keywords

Spatial orientations, neo-liberal education policy, ability grouping, school inclusion/exclusion, Foucault, R.D. Sack

Introduction

This paper responds to recent calls within human geography, and children's geographies more specifically, to consider the value of spatial and geographical perspectives for those who work (and research) with children and young people, in theorising and shedding light upon the dynamics of power, control and resistance that shape children's lives (Foley and Leverett 2011; Horton et al. 2011). In particular, this has been flagged as of relevance to educationalists and those working in contemporary schooling and educational policy (Robertson 2010). Those who have picked up the mantle, however, have tended towards an emphasis upon either the structural determinants of educational spaces, or, upon the agency of children and young people to resist, transform and respond to (adult-led) spatial politics (Kraftl 2012). While both emphases are laudable, failure to link macro to micro geographic foci risks 'underplaying the dynamics of power at play in constituting children and young people as subjects, [as well as] failing to state the relevance of children and young people's geographies to more general concerns' (Pykett 2012, 29). The solution according to Pykett is to engage in a more dialogical relationship between theories of space and education in order to consider not only how space shapes educational endeavours, but also how 'education "makes space"' (Thiem 2009, 157 in Pykett 2012, 29).

In this spirit, the aim of this paper is to consider the relationship between school grouping practices and children's spatial orientations in school, for lower-set 'ability' pupils. The purpose is not only to illuminate the limited agency to form spatial attachments to school for children who are under-achieving, and therefore more at risk of social exclusion (Brown 2015), but also to contextualise such findings against educational policy drivers, in contemplating their role in sculpting children's schooling geographies and framing the exclusion of disadvantaged children. Macro policy concerns are mapped onto micro school practices through a focus on how neo-liberal ideals of performance and accountability are translated through school pedagogy, into spatialised hierarchies of 'ability'. In the drive to raise standards, pupils occupying lower positions can be seen to feel the hard end of surveillance mechanisms, and seek refuge within 'favourite places' in school that escape the constant eye-of-sauron upon their behaviour. The policy implications here not only concern the actions of teachers and learners, but also, the very design, construction and governance of the spaces in which these takes place.

Formulating a critical neo-liberal policy position

A central feature of a critical position towards neo-liberal education policy is its view of learning not as a social endeavour but rather as a focus upon individual achievement and progression. This eclipses an understanding of the interaction between the factors that shape learning (e.g. the dynamic created between pupils, teachers, classroom structure and resources). We can see this reflected in recent changes to school buildings policy in the UK. Prior to 2010 the British Government, under New Labour, had demonstrated some awareness of the importance of a spatial concern with learning. This was evidenced in its huge investment in school building design, in order to 'seek and encourage innovation' (CABE 2007, 8) underpinned by *The Building Schools for the Future programme (BSF)*, which aimed to rebuild or refurbish all secondary schools in England by 2020. However, school buildings policy took an immediate

about turn under the Coalition government following their prompt announcement that BSF was to be replaced with the Priority Schools Building Programme (Livesey 2012). This reflected an emphasis upon teaching quality as opposed to the built environment as responsible for raising attainment, and therefore recommended a standardised school building design, as proposed in the James review (James 2011:iii,6). Kraftl et al. (2012) have highlighted this policy as an example of a ‘significant “spatial shift” [in Conservative policymaking, towards]...the privileging of *localism* as a way to save money and afford local decision makers greater autonomy’(2). They warn of the danger of the localism agenda in that; ‘it will simply reinforce a particular spatial logic... to effectively blame local places (especially disadvantaged neighbourhoods) for nationwide problems, like antisocial behaviour or social exclusion’(3). Therefore, it is pertinent to ask whether issues of social exclusion may be deciphered as those of spatial exclusion, where social inequalities in the community are reproduced within the school. In terms of changing building policy, for example, educationalists are now discouraged from considering how the spatial organisation of the school may play a part in constituting children’s identities as learners and pupils, and their connection to educational success/failure. This is a significant omission given the literature demonstrating the importance, for children, of a flexible and distinctive school design. This has been shown to enable personal connection with region and the natural environment (Procter 2015) where children’s agency to make a material mark on school spaces can strengthen their sense of self and place identity (Clarke 2010). Fundamentally for educators, where children can shape their environment, they are better able to self-direct their own learning (Parnell and Procter 2011).

The downgrading of ecological impacts upon school achievement, as evidenced through changes in buildings policy, is one way in which a neo-liberal imperative in educational policymaking, can be seen to render the attribution of educational success and failure to individual

responsibility (of the school and pupil) as opposed to a state concern. The attendant logic of personal accountability has been critiqued on policy grounds with respect to the marketisation of schooling and parental choice opportunities (Holloway et al. 2010) as well as to the inculcation of the values and behaviours conducive of compliance and control (Pykett, 2012). Such work has employed a Foucauldian frame in conceptualising a form of self governance, or ‘conduct of conduct’ (Foucault 1980: 19), what has more recently been termed biopower (Foucault 2008) by which the state can exercise power over individuals, and populations. Through various levels of filtration, discourses of self-management permeate from state apparatus through to the individual. In the United States, this has been evidenced since 2002 through the No Child Left Behind Policy and its associated assessments of students according to a standards based curriculum, as well as in Australia since 2008, through the National Assessment Programme Literacy and Numeracy tests, which aim to evaluate both learners and teachers (Rooney 2012). With respect to the UK education system we might consider the standardised national assessment tests, by which schools and pupils are judged and evaluated, as well as the strategies that schools employ so as to boost their results, for example through the strategic deployment of resources towards those students most likely to gain the minimum required level, what has been called a form of ‘educational triage’ (Gillborn and Youdell 2001). The malign influence of such strategies upon school pupils, has been in obscuring the structural inequalities that frame children’s life chances through refocusing attention upon individual effort and responsibility. It has been well documented the impact that discourses of pupil performance in standardised tests have upon the anxieties of children and young people (Reay and Wiliam 1999; Booher Jennings 2008, Carr 2015:5-9). Of less focus is a consideration of how policies that shape the ways that schools classify and group children according to achievement and (perceived) ability, might impact upon children’s spatial orientations in school, and concurrently their sense of belonging as pupils.

The value of a spatial lens on educational policy and school processes

Spatial theory is particularly helpful in formulating a critical neo-liberal policy position, because the production of space is viewed as inherently implicated in the production of social relations. As one of the key thinkers to assert the role of the social in spatial production, Henri Lefebvre (1991) argues that space is both an outcome and conduit for the exercise of power; '*[s]ocial space is a (social) product...* [which] also serves as a tool of thought and action, that in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control and hence of domination, of power' (26). Though highlighting the ways in which power is wrought through daily practice and lived experience in space, Lefebvre has been critiqued for his emphasis upon the intentionality of spatial users re-appropriation of space as a conscious political agenda (Soja 1996). Here the work of Michel Foucault is instructive, as a lens through which power operates as a form of social control not only upon, but also *by* the users of educational spaces, for example children in schools. Through his account of surveillance as a 'specific mechanism in disciplinary power' (1991; 175) we can decipher how policy discourses around 'ability' and performance are mapped onto hierarchies of belonging and value in pupils, which are reproduced through the actions in and on space, of teachers, peers, and even children themselves. The limitation of this theoretical lens, however, is in being stuck within classroom practices (and their construction) in affording little agency to the actions of children and their attachments to school spaces. One theory of spatial production and power diffusion, that has been usefully deployed in theorising the control and resistance of children within informal school spaces, is R.D. Sack's theory of territoriality (see Thomson 2005; Pike and Colquhoun 2012) in finely sketching the micro processes by which spaces are drawn, governed and enacted. According to Sack (1986) territoriality refers to; 'the attempt by an individual or group to affect, influence, or control people, phenomena and relationships, by delimiting and asserting control over a geographic

area’(19). In essence it confers the ability to claim ownership, to assert what is ‘ours not yours’ (Sack 1986, 21). This is significant from a social perspective, through inhering the power to mould and affect the behaviour and actions contained within a given territory (Agnew 2000, 73). This paper aims to integrate these perspectives in hypothesising that the surveillance mechanisms that shape a sense of belonging within the classroom may inform children’s sense of attachment and belonging outside of the classroom. It asks the question, can attainment and performative hierarches lead to the territorialisation of school spaces?

The objective of this paper is therefore twofold, firstly to consider the practices by which schools’ grouping and classification of children may affect their sense of belonging in the classroom, and secondly through considering how and to what ends children’s responses to such practices shape their agency to construct ‘favourite places’ within informal school spaces.

Methodology

The data presented are drawn from the experiences of five children assigned to middle and below set ‘ability’ groups across their first two years in secondary school (see table). This research was part of a larger four-year study into the schooling experiences of low-income families. Following two years of research in their primary schools, these children (assigned self-selected pseudonyms) were five of six pupils who again opted into the study, following transition to secondary school. Inviting children to reflect on their previous interviews and to analyse vignettes of my observations on their behaviours, helped to forge trusting relationships with them, in seeing me in a role outside of school staff, having visited their homes and given credence to their experiences.

Table of participants

Child	Age	Maths classes Year 1 (1 highest - 6 lowest)	Maths group Year 2 (1 highest - 6 lowest)	Gender
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Megan	11-12	special education needs	special education needs	Female
Codie	11-12	5	5	Female
Liza	11-12	4	5	Female
Helen	11-12	6	6	Female
Clive	11-12	3, 4	3	Male

Ethnographic observations were made in the classrooms, playgrounds and out-the-way areas of school that children occupied. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with children, their friends, teachers and parents. In order to stimulate discussion of children's schooling experiences, pupils were asked about their 'favourite place in school'. While there is much debate on the distinction between space and place (see for example McGregor 2004) my understanding followed Low and Lawrence-Zuniga's (2003) definition of place as the emotional attachment formed to space, where individuals 'form meaningful relationships with the locales they occupy'(13). Mindful of the importance of these places for children, I resisted requesting permission to visit, and was fortunate to be invited into these spaces by Clive, Helen and Megan.

The children attended 'Maple', a large secondary school in the South East of England. The school was most recently rated as 'satisfactory' for effectiveness and, 'good' for pastoral care, by Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills) who are responsible for the inspection and assessment of state schools in the UK.

Impact of neo-liberal education policy on grouping practices

The pedagogical strategy for classroom formation at Maple school, was to stream each year group according to 'ability' for English, maths and science. There were six classes of descending 'ability', with a further seventh class for special educational needs. In all other lessons children were taught in their registration class, or what in the UK is referred to as the 'tutor group'. Tutor group composition followed school policy to comprise of roughly equal number of boys and girls, and including a broad spread of attainment levels. This was based on key stage two (KS2)

national examinations, which children take at the end of their primary education.

In seeking to raise teaching effectiveness evaluations from ‘satisfactory’ to ‘good’ ratings (the minimal level deemed acceptable by national government) Maple had introduced new platforms to enable more sophisticated assessment and tracking of pupils’ performance in maths. This included the termly testing and recording of attainment for every child. Maths coordinators used these assessments to conduct termly evaluations of student individual performance according to baseline attainment at key stage two (KS2). The data was then used to inform teaching groupings, in consultation with teaching staff.

More recently, Maple had extended its groupings criteria to consider not only pupils’ performance and teachers’ judgments of ‘ability’, but also the *behaviours* of children within maths. Miss Bright, the teacher of class five, the upper of the two lowest maths sets (bar the special needs class) explained the impact on her class:

This class has grown since the reorganisation, which is why you might have noticed an extra support assistant. The pace in this class is more relaxed than the higher sets, and it was thought to be more suited to a number of personalities that were interrupting the learning of pupils in class four.

This statement reveals the entrenchment of surveillance technologies upon student evaluations and teaching practice. The implication of pupil monitoring and grouping decisions made away from the classrooms and in front of pupil performance spreadsheets in Senior Management Team offices, echoes Bentham’s (1995) conception of the panopticon surveillance model. This prison design model is contrived of individual cells positioned cylindrically around a central watchtower. While the watchtower is designed so that it is impossible to see the guards inside,

each cell (and therefore the activity of those incarcerated) is fully visible at all times. The panopticon model has become a metaphor for the way in which surveillance operates in modern society. Through covert mechanisms by which the watched is never sure whether he/she is being observed, nor the purposes to which such judgments will inform, the individual feels in a constant state of under-surveillance. More recently, surveillance theory has evolved from the panopticon model which implies a singular mechanism of observation, to what Haggerty and Ericson (2000) call a 'surveillance assemblage'(609) in hailing the ways in which the individual is constituted through 'multiple records and flows of information about the body and reassembling these...to create a virtual 'data double'...which can be scrutinised and targeted for intervention'(Rooney 2012, 336). Pupils' subjective capacities as learners were reduced to the calibration of their performance according to standardised performance indicators, as well as their behaviour according to a disciplined and compliant learning environment. Not only were there multiple processes for gathering data on pupils (national examination results, school tests, progression according to national curriculum attainment levels), there were also multiple agents (teachers, support staff, and subject co-ordinators) involved in the decisions upon which such judgments informed. In this revision of Bentham's model, the school's performance tracking mechanisms operate as a panoptic, whereby students are rendered as constantly visible through their learning outcomes. Each child is identifiable for targeted remedial action where his/her performance falls outside of the calibrated norm. In this context pupils are under the constant surveillance of staff, even outside of the classroom.

For Foucault (1991) the effectiveness of surveillance above more direct forms of control over the body (e.g. impositions by others) relies on the internalisation of a sense of self that is observed, so that the external exertion of control is not necessary (201). Instead, the individual becomes 'the principle of his own subjection'(203), evaluating his/her behaviour according to

the criteria by which he/she is judged externally, and altering that behaviour accordingly, in a form of self-discipline. For Foucault, surveillance is implicated in the construction of subjectivities not only in affecting behaviours, but also the way the aspects of self that are viewed as valued or otherwise, and the reduction of self to those aspects. As Pykett (2012) observes, '(s)tudents quickly learn how the school, local authority or educational establishment perceive, pigeonhole and arguably limit their localised 'aptitudes' or 'aspirations'(34).

The impact of neo-liberal education policy is now considered on children's schooling experiences, which as we will see, shapes their spatial inclusion within both the formal, and informal parts of school.

Mapping macro policy responses onto micro school practices

The focus is upon maths classes, as the subject most tightly framed by tracking and performance measures, and contextualises pupils' feelings about these lessons, against their experiences of the broader curriculum. This leads on to a discussion of children's 'favourite places' in school in order to consider the variable spatial inclusion/exclusion of children differentially positioned within 'ability' and performance hierarchies.

Positioned at the bottom of grouping hierarchies

In a separate wing to the maths corridors, the special educational needs maths class was situated in an overflow classroom, used for removing children from mainstream lessons for group-work. The group accommodated seven-to-ten children taught maths by a learning support advisor (LSA), with two teaching assistants. Given that literacy games lined the walls and that LSAs were not assigned teaching rooms, the room lacked an identity as a distinct numeracy space. Megan, an Irish Traveller, was assigned to this group for maths and English. Having

experienced multiple school moves and time out of education, she was unable to access the curriculum in mainstream lessons. But without a local-authority statement the school had been unable to provide full-time learning support. Her only available strategy, therefore, was to ask her peers for help, but this had become increasingly difficult as they were disinclined to sit next to her. Megan's tutor group teacher, Mr Sherman, was able to shed some light on her classmates' reluctance to help Megan, in that he believed they felt that it would compromise their own achievement:

Megan is totally different [from other pupils] she is isolated in class. There is no point in her being here because she can't read or write, because no one else wants to work with her, because she's a burden. I don't do anything for her, I don't teach her anything because I can't. She has no statement or funding associated so she has to be in here, but it must be a nightmare for her. She's probably at the level of mid-primary school, but these are not her peers.

(Mr Sherman)

Mr Sherman's rationalisation of pupils' exclusion of Megan reflects Foucault's (2008) homo-economicus model of 'enterprising subjects [who] think of [them]selves as individuals who establish and add value to [them]selves through personal investment' (Sugarman 2015, 104 in Carr 2015, 41). Accordingly, Megan is positioned as a 'burden', revealing both the threat she poses towards her peers' learning, as well as his teaching. As a consequence, when asked how she felt about being in the lowest group, Megan answered, 'Not really good but you have to be there don't you?'.

This discussion indicates the naturalisation of grouping policies within school culture, leading to the uncritical assumption by her teacher and peers that Megan does not belong within the classroom. As Rooney (2012) observes, 'for Foucault (1991, 201), the effect of surveillance

would reach its perfection when the exercise of power was no longer actually necessary' (335).

In Foucault's terms, this control mechanism is complete as Megan can be seen to have constructed a subjectivity of not belonging, in citing the inevitability of her assignment to a special needs group.

Megan's social exclusion within the classroom can be seen to translate into spatial exclusion. Her status of not belonging was communicated to Megan through her peers' unwillingness for her to be seated with them, and reinforced through her teacher's complicity in this behaviour.

On the periphery in her 'favourite place' in school

Megan's experience out-of-class merely compounded her isolation within: 'I hate break because it's just you feel left out, everyone's got a friend and you're just walking round and everyone thinks you're a loner.' (Megan). Indeed, I spent several days surveying the lunch hall and playgrounds for Megan during break-times without a sign of her. One lunch-time I found Megan waiting on her own outside her maths class, 20 minutes before the lesson was due to begin.

When I asked Megan why she was standing in the hallway, she answered:

Megan: If the tutor [room] is closed I just walk around waiting for lessons to be back on.

CB: Walk around school?

Megan: Walk around inside, if I have maths I'll walk around the maths corridor.

Here it can be seen that Megan lacked a sense of belonging in any part of the school, and accordingly was forced to wander aimlessly. It is perhaps unsurprising that she chose to wait in the corridor outside of her maths class, a space on the fringes of attainment hierarchies.

In his concept of territoriality, Sack (1986) observes that spaces require the constant enactment of practices and strategies in order to become territories. They are actively constituted, as opposed to being passively inhabited (Agnew 2000, 91) and as a consequence ‘certain spaces can be thought of as territories at certain times, but not others’ (Pike and Colquhoun 2012, 138). This was evident with respect to the one place that Megan was able to feel comfortable in school, but as we will see, only under certain circumstances:

CB: Where is your favourite place in school?

Megan: Nowhere. Probably just tutor [room]... When the door’s open...

CB: Do you prefer it during break times or tutor group times?

Megan: No, I like it during break-times... Yeah because all the girls in the class just talk to each other in the tutor [group time]... Sometimes [during break-times] I talk with the girls, they all sit in their own little circle and chat.

CB: Must be confusing?

Megan: Yeah.

According to Sack (1986) there are three elements in the control of territories; ‘classification by area’, ‘communication by boundary’ [of the classified area] and ‘enforcement of control over access’ [to the area](21). The tutor room as a physical space conferred a material boundary by means of walls and door, this was designated to the pupils who formed the registration class assigned to that room. School policy dictated that teachers could allow children into the room during break-times, permission that was indicated through the door being left open. Analysing the registration class through Sack’s lens enables theorisation of the subtle shift in governance over space at different times in the school day. While the teacher controlled children’s access to the classroom, in his absence the children re-drew the spatial boundaries of the classroom through rearranging the tables during break-time, thus demarking ownership of the space. On

being invited into the tutor room by Megan I observed that outside of formal lessons the performative pressure was weakened to the extent that children sometimes included Megan in conversation. However, the status of the higher attaining girls assumed spatial privileges over the ‘little circle’ of tables at the center of the room (see figure 1). It represented what Thomson (2005) categorised as a ‘place of limited access’ (69), which offered the potential for a partial inclusion for Megan as she was more likely to be included in conversation with the girls in her class, despite being literally and figuratively outside of the ‘little circle’.

[Figure 1]

Lower-set ability groupings

Three of the case study children, were assigned to lower sets in maths; Helen in class six, and Codie and Liza in class five, of whom Liza, had been moved from class four, as part of the reorganisation. The three classes were positioned sequentially along a corridor, conferring a material as well as a symbolic sense of progression (see figure 2). The interaction between children and adults in the lower-sets was tangibly different to that in the higher sets, in that a higher level of classroom noise was permitted, children were (at times) able to call out in response to teacher questions, and to summon help from the two LSAs. Seating was arranged in rows to facilitate individual work and whole-class discussion, as well as to discourage group collaboration.

[Figure 2]

While lessons in general held little meaning to Helen, Codie and Liza: ‘Cause the teachers are annoying and they don’t like you, and all the lessons are boring’ (Liza), the exception was in their lower-set classes, which they unanimously enjoyed; ‘I do like it [maths], I just think it’s the people that are in my class’ (Codie); ‘and I like the teachers’ (Helen). It was evident that within

maths, children felt that their learning-orientations were endorsed:

‘Cause if you’re silly in those lessons, the teacher doesn’t like it but they don’t mind, they just like tell you to get on with your work, you can still make your friends laugh, but they like want you to get on with your work at the same time. (Liza)

These accounts indicate to what extent children felt alienated by the performative pressure of lessons, whereby they perceived their behaviour as not tolerated outside of the lower-set lessons, to the extent that they felt victimised by teachers. Nevertheless, there was a difference between the impact of the setting schema upon children’s ability to generate a sense of belonging. For Helen the impact had been wholly positive as her teacher explains:

She [Helen] has settled down a lot. I think she’s growing up. She used to be very easily distracted, and now she does chat a lot, but she gets her work done. She seems a lot happier and although she does chat she will now tell off Lorna for distracting her.

Helen’s shift towards ‘self-disciplining’ (Foucault 1991) in maths, is attributed by her teacher to a greater sense of belonging in class, indicating that the performative pressure of the school can create a hierarchy of belonging even within the lower- set maths class. Codie and Liza, in contrast, had to assimilate a knock to their self-esteem from being grouped in the lower sets. As one of the ‘personalities’ that had been reassigned from class four to class five, Liza felt the need to justify to me her down-setting to be a product not of her abilities, but rather of her learning orientation: ‘I’m smarter than all of them, it’s just my concentration, they’re down there because they’re not very bright and I’m down there because of my concentration’ (Liza). For Codie, an assault to her self-esteem had been caused by her removal from French lessons taught

within the mixed ability tutor group, to learn European studies, in a small group of children across the year group with low attainment taught by LSAs:

I prefer being in the [French] class, um I hate the teachers they treat you like two years olds and the work is so easy...I just act like it's so hard that I just ask for help...if they want to treat us like two year olds then why not let us act like it. (Codie)

Codie's description of her behaviour in European studies, like Liza's account of being a 'silly person' is an example of what Foucault (1982) calls the 'productive power' of discourse;

This form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him [sic] by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. (212)

The discourses around what it means to be a high/low ability, good/bad student at Maple have had a productive effect on those behaviours. It is performative in the sense of; 'that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names' (Butler 1993, 13), or in Youdell's (2006) terms, 'the school student is so because he/she is designated as such'(519). Liza and Codie perform being 'silly' and 'like two year olds' because that is how the school positions them. While both students appear to appropriate these terms autonomously, the element of agency by which they do so is limited. This is not a free but rather a 'discursive agency' (Butler 1997,127) by which student can only 'act within and at the borders of the constraint of their subjectivation' (Youdell 2006, 526). Unlike Megan, Liza and Codie's responses to school categorisation shows elements of resistance, but such resistance only reaffirms their status as lower 'ability' learners.

Constructing private 'favourite places' in school

Children's differential sense of belonging within the classroom was reflected during their free time in school. Codie and Liza (similarly to Megan) lacked a sense of ownership over any specific school place but rather orientated towards the school site in an itinerant manner; '[I]wander round the school' (Liza) 'Just walking around really...is the main thing we do' (Codie). Yet when asked of their 'favourite place' in school, it was evident there were key moments in the school day where spaces opened up as meaningful. For Codie this was 'out by the hall' because:

Codie: No-one really goes there. They only go there for the food and then they've gone after a while.

CB: So you like the hall when it's empty?

Codie: Yeah it feels like there's only a few people left walking past and we can really use it and think [pretend] we've got the place to ourselves, me and Ellie.

Whereas for Liza, it was 'the art room,' which she visited alone in order to attend to dark feelings:

Liza: If I'm annoyed with someone, or feel lonely, I can just go in there and look round at other people's art. If I go in there... if it's dark paint on a page, I look at that and sort of feel, say to myself, that's dark colours, that makes me feel better because they feel, they've expressed, and they're dark.

CB: So that makes you feel less alone in your feelings?

Liza: Yes.

It was evident that privacy was a key element in the importance of 'favourite places' for these children, and I resisted asking to see them, in the absence of an invitation. Previous research has underlined the importance of private school spaces for both social purposes such as 'fantasy

play' (Lowry 1993) and to consolidate friendships (Curtis and May 1974) as well as a retreat from others, in order to 'escape from external pressure' (Lowry 1993; 138), and to find peace and tranquility (Dillon et al., 2015). However, for Codie and Liza, their desire for privacy illuminates the extent to which both children felt displaced in school. Space is constructed as meaningful as an island outside of dominant norms and regulations, what Jones (2008) has named 'a liminal space, in-between the formal and informal worlds of the school'(329). It is not that these places enabled children to generate a sense of connection and belonging within the school community, but rather that they nullified a sense of not belonging, through processing negative feelings (Liza) or imagining an alternative space where she does belong (Codie).

As the only one able to carve out a social space in school over which she felt a meaningful sense of ownership, Helen's favourite place in school was not so tightly framed by temporal shifts:

CB: What's your favourite place in school?

Helen: Out there near maths, it's like just us, we just like mess around and hang around with each other.

CB: So it feels like your space?

Helen: Yeah kind of like that.

This area constituted a small courtyard outside the maths block, which was occupied by Helen's friendship group of seven boys and girls, who visited the space during lunchtime and break-times. Access was only possible via a small pathway between two large trees and sealed off by a hedge. Pupils designated their sense of ownership by dropping their school bags at the entrance to the courtyard upon arrival, reflecting Sack's (1986) emphasis of 'communication by boundary'(21) as a key element in the demarcation of territory. It was notable that only Helen and her friends occupied this area, which indicated that other pupils also recognised the group's

claim to the space. It may not have been coincidental that the situation of the courtyard was in view of Helen's maths class, as the one formal school space where she felt accepted by her teacher, and comfortable within a learning environment. Helen's case raises the question of whether the territorialisation of the 'courtyard' by her social group was connected to her behavioural shift towards compliance and on-task working. Could it be that the positive regard she felt within maths classes contributed towards a sense of belonging and ownership over informal school space?

Middle set 'ability' grouping

The middle set classes (three and four) were set beneath each other on the first, and ground floor. Reflecting the layout of the ground floor (figure 2) the upper floor led from the stairwell on to class three, class two, and finally, class one. In being divided between the upper and lower sets, the spatial positioning of these classes emphasised a distinction in ability hierarchies. The significance of this was felt by Clive, who could be seen to have asserted the greatest agency over spatial construction inside the classroom, in seeking to elevate his spatial grouping. Despite achieving the government national standard in maths at key-stage two, Clive had been assigned to the lower of the two middle ability groups at the end of his first year, due to the disruptive effect of his friendship group's behaviour in maths lessons.

The seating arrangements in the middle and upper sets were of ability-grouped tables to encourage on-task group discussion. The pedagogic strategy emphasised less whole-class teaching and more group and individual work. The pacing of lessons was faster in that pupils were often given time-frames to complete activities in, and children often had to work in silence during activities in which they were to work individually.

Clive himself acknowledged that the classroom spatial arrangements had affected his performance in maths, and this troubled him to the extent that he had asked his teacher in class four to set up an individual desk for him, away from his friendship group and at the back of the classroom, because:

Sometimes my friends ask me to mess about and I say “okay then” and I get like a cross, [behavioural sanction]... Cause every time I sit at the front I always turn... err look back to see my friends and if I kind of like sit at the back I can’t... I just have to keep my eyes forward ‘cause I can’t look back, there would be a wall.

Clive’s attempt to elevate his position in the performance hierarchy in the classroom is indicated in his shift in grouping arrangement (see figure 2). He believed that he could only change his behaviour by reconfiguring his position in the classroom to be outside of the boundary of the territory of his friendship group. This strategy had proved successful as he was shortly promoted to class three, generating a positive sense of belonging in class:

Clive: When I moved up here I was a 4A and now I’m a 6C.

CB: And how did you feel about it?

Clive: Really happy ‘cause I got the best in the class.

Negotiating exclusive rights to ‘favourite places’ in school

It was notable that Clive’s promotion to the higher maths class coincided with his successful assertion of agency with respect to the social territories he occupied in school. This followed negotiation with his registration class teacher to access ‘the pond’ behind the tutor-room, during lunchtimes and breaktimes. The pond was situated in a secluded area set away from pathways between buildings, by means of a circular hedge. Permission to spend time at the pond had been

granted to Clive and his friends as an exception to normal school rules, under the condition that they would 'clean it out'. The significance of the pond for Clive emerged when he was asked what made him feel happy at school, to which he replied:

Clive: The pond.

CB: Why is that then?

Clive: Because it's fun, its fun hanging out there, 'cause no-one is watching me.

CB: So it feels like your space then?

Clive: Yeah.

While spatial analyses of the school have emphasised the ways in which spaces are governed by adult processes of control and regulation over children's mind and body (Rooney 2012; Teage 2014) Clive's negotiation of access to the out-of-bounds pond territory is an example of children's ingenuity in challenging the spatial rules defined by adults (Holloway and Valentine 2000, Hacket et al. 2015). For Clive and his friends, 'the pond' represented a space in which Clive felt an element of ownership and autonomy, outside of the watchful gaze of authority figures and outsiders to the group.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper has argued that a spatial perspective may afford a deeper understanding of the processes of social inclusion/exclusion in school from both a macro and micro perspective. In interrogating the linking of macro-micro spatial analyses, Ansell (2009) has advocated a 'flat ontology' approach that considers the visible and invisible realms of children's existence. She implores researchers to reach beyond children's local-level interactions to consider the policies and discourses that shape them (204-205). Through Foucault's insights of the mechanisms of discipline and control that are brought to bear on the behaviours of individuals (1991; 2008) a

critical education policy position has been formulated, which elucidates the invisible forces that conflate 'ability' groupings with behavioural standards within Maple school. This was evident not only for the children of this study but also by their teachers, peers and senior management. Such conflation had dire ramifications in that children understood their position within groupings hierarchies to be constitutive of their sense of value as learners. This points towards the territorialisation of surveillance discourses, whereby hierarchies of 'ability' dictate what it means to belong in school, in that children's sense of belonging generated inside the classroom, could be seen to correlate with their agency to construct and occupy informal 'favourite' school spaces.

At the bottom of the 'ability' set groups in maths, Megan is the most excluded in school, shunned by her classroom peers and only able to generate a partial sense of belonging outside of the performative pressure of lessons. As a victim of surveillance hierarchies, Megan's spatial orientations at school are peripheral at best.

In the lower ability groups, Liza, Codie and Helen were able to generate some sense of belonging within lower-set maths classes but this only reinforced their pupil identities as under-valued in the performative culture of other lessons. For Codie and Liza this was also mirrored in their agency within informal school spaces, where they were unable to carve out a space of belonging outside of the classroom, instead orientating towards private places. Helen, in contrast had exerted agency in her occupation of the maths courtyard territory of her friendship group. It may be that her validation by the teacher in maths lessons conferred a greater sense of belonging out-of-class.

As the highest attaining of the case-study pupils, (but still average with respect to the school

hierarchies) Clive's sense of belonging in class was conflicted by his social group pressure to misbehave, and his desire to achieve in maths, resulting in behavioural shifts closely tied to his grouping allocation. Clive had also achieved the greatest spatial capital, in negotiating spatial-borders, as defined by those in authority, to his advantage.

However, even for those who occupied higher positions in 'ability' hierarchies (such as Clive and the 'little-circle' of girls) children's agency could be seen to be conditional upon attendance to strict behavioural cultures of compliance and deference to authority. This may explain why, for all children, 'favourite places' were not fixed locations, but places that opened up in specific places, in key moments of the day that were outside of the surveillance of others. Using Sack's (1986) analyses of territory marking reveals the extent to which these children were displaced in formal school environments. In asserting Keith and Pile's (1993) claim that to belong socially is to belong spatially (6) children were therefore determined to carve out niches in which they could generate a sense of belonging. Such analyses emphasise the construction and governance of school space as not only political but also dynamic (Lefebvre 1991; Soja 1996; Massey 2005). The boundaries of children's 'favourite places' were both spatially and temporally fluid, indicating both the ingenuity and opportunism with which children orientate to space (Jones 2000) as well as the radical difference that a sense of ownership over and inclusion within space, can have on children's sense of belonging.

Understanding the territorialising effects of 'ability' hierarchies enables a deeper consideration of the design, construction and governance of school space. The policy implications here task educators to question assumptions that a standardised approach to school building is in the best interests of children's learning (as underpinned in the current Priority Schools Building Programme agenda). Children's involvement in the design and use of school buildings has been

encouraged for the benefit to learning opportunities and emotional wellbeing (Dillon et al. 2015). Yet it may also be that children require a flexible school design in seeking sanctuaries (however temporary) to escape the radar of surveillance mechanisms. Children's agency in this way can be seen to buffer the coercive forces of neo-liberal policy and enable children to emotionally attach to school. However, children's participation in spatial governance is complicated by the differential positioning of pupils within the territorialisation of school space, such that children who have achieved a stronger hold in hierarchies of belonging may not easily relinquish their spatial capital to include those on the fringes. Understanding the winners and losers of spatial dynamics may be especially important for children in lower-‘ability’ settings, as those more vulnerable to feelings of exclusion and failure to generate a sense of belonging in school.

The findings from an ethnographic case study can not attest to be programmatic, however, they do point towards further research needed into the connection between grouping practices, spatial inclusion and educational achievement, especially in schools forced to respond to government pressure to raise standards. The policy implications of these findings lend support to critical neo-liberal arguments that aim to challenge the reduction of children's schooling value to achievement in narrow performance indicators and the attendant disciplinary controls upon children's behaviour (Booher-Jennings 2008; Carr 2015). It also raises a question of the differential power and autonomy that children are able to wield in and on school spaces, in exploring children's success and achievements in school. This invites consideration of a ‘spatial capital’ lens to furnish the sociology of education literature, replete with references to social, cultural and human capital in theorising educational inequalities.

Within the sociology of education there has been a tendency towards a myopic focus upon the classroom as a site for the construction of (under) valued pupil identities. This paper has aimed to extend a spatial focus towards the informal spaces that children sculpt and occupy within school, in considering how they may be linked with education policy and the in-school processes that enact them. This has directed the research loci towards the out-of-the-way and often hidden spaces with which children emotionally connect in school. Recent work in this tradition has started to unpack the emotional component to children's spatial experience (Dillon et al. 2015; Hacket et al. 2015). This may be a profitable direction to challenge the logic of a performative neo-liberal approach to motivation. Considering the effects of groupings policies with respects to children's spatial orientations in school, underlines the extent to which identities of belonging (both as learner and pupil) are not only constructed within the formal but also the informal parts of school. This may present some opportunity to develop inclusion strategies aimed at fostering a sense of ownership and autonomy in school spaces outside of the classroom.

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